

# The Craze of Fashion among Female students of Ghanaian Tertiary Institutions: Implication for Teaching and Learning

Josephine Sarpong Nyantakyi\*

Lecturer, Department Of Graphic Design, Takoradi Polytechnic, Takoradi

Joseph Adu-Agyem

Snr. Lecturer, Department Of General Studies, College Of Art and Built Environment, KNUST

## ABSTRACT

The essence of tertiary education is to groom the youth to take up middle level and managerial status in the world of work. These breeds of intellectuals are expected to demonstrate impeccable character, unsullied reputation and at best act as copybook for the younger generation. However, In recent times, the youth in Ghana, especially the females counterpart in tertiary institutions, have developed an awful taste for foreign fashion trends which have been described by some as inimical and amoral to the values and ethics of the society. A survey indicates that morality on our tertiary campuses has gotten to it breaking limits with regards to clothing. The adults have termed it as “indecent dressing. The female students, our future academicians, who ought to know better are regrettably and constantly championing and propagating this trend of fashion which they term as “wicked”. This has a lot of detrimental implications on the teaching and learning in the universities and other tertiary institutions. This trend in fashion has been affecting both lecturers and students, especially the male students hence the need for this paper. It examines the various definitions of fashion, takes a look at the current trends of fashion and analyse critically their implications on academic work - teaching and learning especially - and give suggestions as to how they could either be curbed or rectified. The study mainly based on observations, interviews and questionnaire revealed that female students who are younger, mostly between the ages of 17 and 25 patronize this kind of fashion. Also their “indecent dressings” have some ruinous effects on teaching and learning in tertiary institutions in Ghana. The study concludes that while the young females want to free themselves from the ‘rigid and fading’ indigenous code of ethics in dressing, they should note that being fashionable does not imply being disrespectful to socio-cultural norms and values of the society that encourages the girl-child go to school.

**Keywords:** Fashion craze, teaching and learning, culture, dressing to kill, style-line

## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

The relatively young Ghanaian fashion industry has suffered tremendously from the international fashion industry. Majority of our young people, mainly females, who have had the opportunity to travel abroad returned with different opinions of what our indigenous fashion should entail.

The Ghanaian 'Community today has been influenced by the proliferation of captivating advertisements, magazines, video clips and movies from the Western world. It has developed to the extent that even now it is obvious on our streets, in our schools, college campuses, social gatherings as well as church places that anything Ghanaian is almost inferior to that of the Europeans or the American. In fact, the craze for international fashion trends has become the “hottest issue” on our campuses. Almost every up-and-coming female student is caught up with this fever. The desire to be among the “best” and “most current” has created some kind of trendy competitions among our ladies. As they try to outdo each other in style-lines and fashionable wears, other problems and challenges come up which invariably affect the teaching and learning atmosphere.

Quality education in fashion could however, project and promote social, economic and moral development of Ghana. Most Ghanaian youth at present totally ignore the local ethics of culture in the way they dress, especially for lectures and around the campuses. Quansah (2004) and Ainooson (1999) opine that young ladies wear transparent and skimpy blouses, very short skirts and skimpy pairs of trousers which expose the very vital parts of the body - for instance, the mid section around the navel and pubic region - for which the purpose of clothing is to cover.

Again, some latest costume styles do not relate to certain figure types; yet our elite ladies put them on irrespective of their body shapes. This truly exposes their ignorance in fashion (...). According to Ulzen-Appiah

(2003), many individuals are concerned with fashion trends that appear to be a deviation of the true Ghanaian way of dressing. This causes people to wonder whether this nation is not passing through a world of refined madness. However, others also believe that there is no “true” way of dressing in Ghana or elsewhere, because all clothing traditions were “crazes” before they caught on and were accepted and passed down through generations - like kaba and slit. These concerns of the fashion trends of today call for a critical look at their implications on the Teaching/Learning (atmosphere) in tertiary institutions; the universities and the polytechnics in Ghana in particular.

The study was therefore to investigate some possible positive and negative impacts that today’s trends in fashion have on teaching and learning in the tertiary institutions and how these probably negative effects could be mitigated or corrected soon or in the future.

## 1.2 MATERIALS AND METHODS

### Population and Data Collection

The qualitative and survey methods were used for the study. The study population comprised a sample of students and lecturers who had similar attitudes and experiences from six accredited public tertiary institutions, namely; The University of Ghana, Legon; Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST); University of Education, Winneba Campus; Takoradi Polytechnic; Kumasi Polytechnic and Sunyani Polytechnic.

Data were collected from fifty randomly selected students, (of which ten were males and forty females (both fashionable and “collo” or old-fashioned) and ten lecturers from each of the institutions through comprehensively prepared questionnaire, open-ended interviews and unstructured observations. Focus group data gathering tool was also used for some of the male students. Some lecturers and some male and female adult students were interviewed individually to solicit their opinions on or how they feel about the current trend of fashion on the various campuses and lecture halls. The sets of questionnaire were distributed to the randomly selected respondents based on age and how they were dressed; and these respondents were also observed. The general response rate to the questionnaire was 70% (270 sets of questionnaire out of 350 were retrieved).

## 1.3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study indicated that the ladies aged between 17 and 25 years had a strong enthusiasm for fashion. Fashion is the manner in which a majority of people dress, wear their hair, behave socially, or do other things in a given period (Encarta Encyclopaedia, 2007). The young ladies exhibited fashion especially in different hairstyles, and in different colours that matched the shapes of their faces as well as the colour of the different kinds of outfits (including mini-skirts, sleeveless blouses, skinnies and ‘skin tight’ trousers) and accessories they wore. The attitude of the ladies may be captured by what a famous Ghanaian designer, Ofori Atta, stated that “fashion is the overall appearance of an individual which is accepted by a group of people at a particular time” (Daily Graphic, May 5, 1993 p5).

### The Place of Today’s Fashion

In Ghana, traditions of dress are effectively being eliminated by the more casual style of the West. The fitted-and-sewn garment styles of America and Europe which came through migration in successive waves across the oceans have affected the Ghanaian fashion industry. Table 1 shows some responses to questions asked with regards to the awareness of fashion especially dress styles in the Ghanaian society at present.

**Table 1: Different Styles in the Ghanaian Society and where they are Displayed**

Questions	Responses			
	Yes	%	No	%
1. Are you aware of the many dress style in the Ghanaian society presently	258	96	12	4
2.Can you describe some of the dress styles and their names	246	91	24	9
			<b>Churches</b>	<b>In the streets</b>
3.Where do you mostly find some of these dress styles displayed	180	46		44

Source: Field Survey, 2016

According to the survey, 180 respondents from the tertiary institutions (67%) noted that the place of fashion is mostly visible in the universities, the Polytechnics and other campuses of tertiary institutions as compared to the churches and the streets. A majority of the respondents (96%) were also aware that there were a host of dress styles in present day Ghanaian society while only 91% were able to describe and state the names of the dress styles as indicated in Table 1. The current style-lines that were indicated include: a) the clinging see-through clothes; b) the skin tight trousers that fall below the hips exposing features of female forms in the raw; c) short mini-trousers or Capri pants from which the waist band of underwear is pronounced to reveal the skin and beads worn on the waist; d) mini-skirts exposing enough of the thighs; e) slit skirts revealing much of the thigh(s); f) semi-nude dress exposing the stomach or lower abdomen, navel or even parts of the breasts.

It was also noted that these style features, that is, 'key-hole', 'hold my thighs and leave my leg' etc, which are in vogue on the international market, all cut across all the collection of clothes one could make. Those who do not conform to the style-lines and features are branded as "stuck-ups", "anti-socials" or "collo". This lends support to Davis' (1980) and Lindfield's (1975) view that the concept of fashion arose as cultural values changed to depict visual distinction among social classes over time. In this case the fashion of the "enlightened" ladies distinguishes them from that of their counterparts who are "collo" or "stuck-ups"

Malinowski indicated in Rouse (1989:2) that "clothing was created by people in response to a physical need for shelter and protection." However, there are some styles that undermine clothing's function as protection and practicability. For instance, the wearing of mini-skirts and cropped or short tops during cold weather shows how function is abused. Also, the wearing of black suits in Ghana under the scorching sun shows how love for fashion can override important things like comfortability and suitability.

Through the interviews, it was found that the youth, particularly, young ladies have become fashion victims and copy foreign fashion blindly. About 50% of the 300 ladies studied indicated that they do not consider whether or not what they have chosen to wear is appropriate for their figure type, occasion or status. A lot of the ladies overdress for lecture theatres and halls. They emerge in flimsy clothes with very high heeled shoes which are uncomfortable and unsuitable for walking long distances. The underlying factor seems to be that the young ladies are using fashion as a means to compete with one another just like before the late Middle Ages, when only wealthy and powerful individuals concerned themselves with the style of their clothes (World Book Encyclopaedia, 1995; Rouse 1989).

It was observed that some of the bags the ladies used can only contain personal effects; no room for exercise or note books. By and large, the lecture halls become fashion parades where ladies show off their wealth. It was again observed that about 70% of ladies would make unreasonable demands on their parents and guardians just to upgrade their wardrobe. A lady told the researchers that among the Social Sciences students of KNUST, there is a lady who would not attend lectures unless she gets a new set of clothes (Personal conversation, 2006).

Interviews with some female students showed that about 75% of them imitate people they admire and so those people become their icons, mentors, role models and heroines. Some of them mentioned artistes like Akosua Agyepong, Mzbel, Becca, Angelique Kidjo, and the late Lady Diana among others as their idols. A section of them also have started wearing coiffures that give a boyish look. There are also those who wear tattoos on their bodies and project themselves as the 'true' African woman.

In addition they wear accessories like "slave" bracelets around their arms, jewelries in the nose and navels, on the toes and ankles. These accessories to some people are associated with lesbianism. Moreover, about 91% of the respondents to the questionnaire who were able to mention and describe the dress styles admitted that they adopted the foreign dress style, which includes mini-skirts, clinging clothes, and transparent clothes that leave a little to the imagination. This is what some have nicknamed "air-conditioned" designs because they expose greater parts of the body, thereby allowing the body to 'cool'. These are also known on our campuses as "Apuskelenke", "I am aware", "Accident", "Ma tricky wo", or "Ma tricky Jesus or Osofo". They explained that "apuskelenkes" are the slim line clothes that hug the body especially around the stomach, hip line and buttocks. The other types known as "I am aware" are those tiny waist less clothes that really drop below the hip line and expose the wearer's undergarments. These come in the form of hipsters, capris and mini-skirts. The "ma tricky wo" type are normally long skirts or dresses with slits that open up to the thigh level on either the sides of the clothes, or the back. Therefore, Harold et al (1999) made the observation that fashion is a social process in which some people begin by adopting the image of people unlike them. Those in the same sector of the society tend to emulate their distinct appearance with publicity in media playing its part, until differentiation disappears and the process begins all over again in search of new areas.

Why should our female students in tertiary institutions follow Western trends of Fashion?

From the interviewees and focus groups, it was revealed that all fashionable ladies patronize the new trends fashion; for example, slim line clothes, bell bottom denim trousers, slacks, etc. According to some of them initially many adults or older generation disapproved of their style line but this was an assault on their personality and freedom of choices and for that matter rebelled. The survey indicates that the youth wanted to prove to the mature group that they also have their own tastes in fashion and because it is from the Western world does not mean it is not good for them; it is suitable for them too. Other reasons for their preference for Western trends in fashion are indicated in Table 2.

**Table 2: Why Female Tertiary Students Follow Western Fashion**

Question	General responses
1.why do you think ladies at the tertiary level follow western trends of fashion	It is a way to show their different status in the society, it is a way to display their wealth since fashion implies one buys something new every now and then; they want a sense of belonging, they do not want to be left out so they have to be up- to- date; they feel they are enlightened so one of showing that is through copying western style of dressing; they want to appear different from those who have not been to tertiary institutions; the opposite sex are attracted by the way they see ladies dress in movies, magazines so why not dress like them so they can be attracted to us; a way to make others aware of that they have travelled abroad

**Source: Field Survey 2016**

Some of the general responses to the question in Table 2 will be looked at further.

#### High Social Recognition

In the first instance fashion expresses the desire for high social status. Those who wear the clothes for this reason are admired, envied and criticized for the way they look and what their style of appearance portrays. For a female to be admitted into the university; the highest level of education in Ghana, means she has risen to a social class and has attained a high status (Field study, 2006). Definitely, her power to maintain the set standard calls for money to be able to purchase extravagant and luxurious clothing such as designers' wear (linen and lace fabrics).

#### Show of Wealth

The survey as well revealed that other female students want to emulate the upper class or desire to show off wealth (Rouse, 1989; Davis, 1980 & Lindfield, 1975). This implies that one must have money to purchase clothes to remain in fashion, and to express new tastes that emerge every now and then. Moreover, some students who do not have the means will do everything possible to maintain this class, just to be recognised as 'one of them' (Barclay, 1972). Thus, it was alleged that some students engage in prostitution and other social vices to be able to attain and maintain this goal. Theft cases have escalated at the halls of residence, hostels, lecture halls and libraries among others (Evelyn Amoako, Personal communication, 2005). It has also resulted in the ascendancy of pre-marital sex, abortion, teenage pregnancies and other sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) (Field study, 2013; Quansah, 2004).

#### Dresses in Vogue

Another point is the idea of being up-to-date; that is linking oneself with new trends. By adopting and wearing the newest dress styles, it follows that one is "in touch" with what is known as the "latest" in society. It is a feeling among female youth that one has knowledge of the direction in which fashion or style is moving. Those who do not conform to this order termed "collo", "outmoded", or "out of fashion". Students who do not want to be called and recognised as such will do their best to follow new trends of fashion which of course may not really be their desire. Their conscience is disturbed; attention is therefore given to new styles whiles the purpose for being in the university becomes compromised and sometimes unattainable.

#### Attraction to Opposite Sex

Again some female students wear provocative dresses emphasizing certain parts of their bodies in order to attract the opposite sex (Quansah, 2004). This phenomenon which draws the attention of some male students and some

male lecturers have been termed “dressing to kill” or “weapons of mass destruction”. The research indicated that some of the female students do such things intentionally. Some ladies interviewed confided that they do not have beautiful faces to ‘make up’ to appeal to men, so these exposed parts are to act as enticements (Quansah, 2004). Another lady when asked why she always dresses this way remarked that “that is what boys like”. In this context, it is some male counterparts who encourage them to dress in that manner. Male students may also be aroused sexually and if these student ladies sit in the same class with them one could imagine what might be going through their minds. The desire for sex is the ultimate. No doubt, rape cases and STDs are on the ascendency. Whether or not these ladies are justified by their actions depends on what our society considers culturally acceptable.

#### Experience Abroad (The “been tos”)

It was observed that the supra culture or the world culture as well has an effect on what female students wear both within and without campus. The “been tos” or those who travel abroad during the holidays definitely adopt certain styles in vogue in those countries they visited and introduce them on the various campuses. Although most of these styles may not be appropriate for our weather and culture, yet students admire them and term as the latest styles (Rouse, 1989).

#### Effects of Fashion Craze on Teaching and Learning

The study revealed some interesting, and striking effects of today’s fashion craze of the female students on teaching and learning.

#### Phone Calls at Lectures

First of all, the lecture halls are the very places where such students advertise themselves, receive phone calls and make all the necessary arrangements for their unhealthy activities. Social media has been their surest means of communication, making use of what Sap and face book during lectures. The lecture halls are also used as the points of contact since most of the students are lodging in scattered privates hostels that are distances away from campuses. This usually disrupts lecture activities for such students; their minds are ultimately on the next line of action after the phone calls or chats they will receive or have already received.

#### Lateness to Lectures

Secondly, one also wonders what time one uses to get down to the lecture halls for lectures. It was found through the study that a few ladies wear more accessories than they need. For such ladies, they spend not less than two hours to dress up, fix ‘make up’ and adorn their faces with all kinds of things. These are the people who are notorious for lateness in class (Conversation with Focus groups at KNUST, Legon and Polytechnic 2014). As they pass by, they attract a lot of stares and distract attention when arriving at lecture halls.

Even though this affects teaching and learning, according to some students, some lecturers do not complain because they think university students are mature and are supposed to know what is right. On the other hand, some lecturers have resorted keeping them outside lecture rooms since the whole personality and the body language of some of the lady late comers become so offensive to them. Other lecturers simply ignore them to their own fate.

#### Distraction of Attention

Majority of the lecturers (about 60%) in the various campuses indicated that some of the ladies’ dresses and ‘make ups’ are eyesores and need to be addressed by institutional authorities. Sometimes they feel like turning away these students out of their lectures if the law or the tertiary statutes will permit them.

#### Loss of Concentration

Moreover, some female students pointed out that they copy fashion and feel ashamed and embarrassed and become nervous that sometimes they could not concentrate on lectures or listen to them. One even confided that she was compelled to go back to the hostel to change but also felt ashamed to come back in a different dress. She finally ended up forfeiting lectures outright (Conversation with a Painting student, KNUST by Affum Kwarteng, May 2014).



## Devotion of time and attention to one's Appearance

Being fashionable also shows willingness to devote much time and attention to one's appearance. It therefore requires a lot of effort, time spent in perusing through magazines, catalogues, browsing on the internet, window shopping, watching television and even seeking advice from fashion designers.

In tertiary institutions students need ample time to do more reading and conduct in-depth research. However, those who are fashion-minded waste much of their precious time on either a hair style or make up (i.e. painting and trimming the eye brows, fixing false eye lashes, fixing acrylic artificial nails, etc). Equal time is also wasted in selecting accessories that aesthetically match their hair style and make up. This time could have been used in doing their assignments, reading or researching. This will automatically affect their academic performance since not much time will be devoted to lectures and studies.

## Favoritism

Another effect is that female students use dressing they call "wicked" as a means of enticing men even the unsuspecting lecturer(s) (Field study, 2015; Quansah, 2004). Teaching thus develops into favouritism. Those female students whom the lecturer(s) will be interested in enjoy an advantage in class assessment, mid-semester exams and sometimes end of semester exams to the detriment of the innocent ones, particularly the male counterparts. These unhealthy associations breed corruption among some lecturers because they may see the females as easy preys and get tempted to satisfy their demands (Affum Kwarteng, 2005; Sarpong-Nyantakyi, 2004). Some students asserted rather unfortunately that a few unscrupulous lecturers often may leak examination questions to them and also probably offer some of them unreasonable marks during exams; all because of favouritism (Field study, 2012).

Recently, standards in education have fallen. Since the youth are more interested in fashion than their education, they fail to put in much effort during studies and when it is exams' time they try every way possible to make it, hence leakages during exams. No doubt, some of our female students leave their books in order to contest in pageants such as Miss Ghana, Miss Universe, Miss Malaika and others for the coveted prize (Dr. Adjei Hene, personal conversation).

Some advantages of fashion as revealed by the female students through the study are as follows.

1. Fashions in vogue could easily allow the students full relaxation and body satisfaction at lectures, laboratory, studio work in the case of artists among others and enable them concentrate better. In other words, wearing trousers, for instance, provide more relaxed postures at lectures such that vital parts are not exposed unknowingly. To the students, this provides intense concentration on anything they are doing without the attendant constant checking on one's dress and posture. This simply means that when they are so much absorbed in their learning processes, they more often than not lose guard of their body postures to onlookers and that wearing shorts, trousers (full or three-quarters) etc. save them from certain degree of embarrassment. Besides, wearing of miniskirts or trousers enhance their free movement to and from lectures
2. Gorgeous dressing refreshes the mind and keeps attention off other students' dressing since the wearer feels good about herself.
3. Fashion helps the female students pride themselves with their beautiful shapes and forms and show these off to prospective suitors or admirers. To them, the campuses are where they may possibly be picked by male students as future partners. As such they use fashion as a way to avoid being considered as 'drop-outs' by their would-be suitors who are eager for smart modern good-looking females.

However, it is worthy of note, that the male respondents confided that initially they admire these 'fashionable' females but after they have satisfied their lustful desires, they would turn and look for ladies who dress decently and have good manners and marry them (Field study 2015; Quansah, 2004). Fifty percent of these males (30 out of 60 males) disclosed that they would never allow their serious girlfriends or fiancée to dress provocatively. They argued that appearance reveals a lot about an individual, for that matter, they did not want their future wives to be mistaken for cheap women (Field study 2015; Quansah, 2004).

4. Some of the female students asserted that mini-skirts, trousers, smart tops, etc. cost less, need less time to handle and they are easy to maintain and clean as well.

5. They also see fashion as a means of emancipating themselves from the rigid and fading indigenous code of ethics in dressing. Besides, since culture is dynamic, it is through fashion that the females believe they would be abreast with local and international standards, without waiting for any opportunity before learning to keep up with the pace.

#### **1.4 CONCLUSION**

To conclude, one would say fashion is modern and always seeks to keep abreast with the times. It makes the individual stand out from the crowd, making him exclusive, more creative, more daring, more up-to-date and aesthetically pleasing. It is thus difficult to control or abolish the flow or move of fashion. A society is made up of people with a dynamic culture. Fashion will continue to exist, because it is a way of a particular people. So far as society continues to exist, so also will fashion and the changes it may undergo. People's desires and ambitions will be expressed to meet their taste, so there is no way fashion can be done away with. All the same, being fashionable does not mean being disrespectful to social and cultural norms and values of our society. This will ensure that the cream of the society, the female, is preserved and protected for future. This is because females are seen as the pacesetters for a community who wants to encourage the girl-child to go to school.

#### **1.5 RECOMMENDATIONS**

Despite the fact that it will be difficult to adhere to suggestions made in this discourse, it is important to spell out a few. It is thus recommended that:

1. The male counterparts and other female students not deeply involved in this form of fashion could organise seminars, workshops, demonstrations and offer petitions to the Vice Chancellors and Rectors to prescribe a dress code for female students in tertiary institutions.
2. The tertiary institutions on admitting fresh students should educate as well as counsel them during orientation on how to dress decently for lectures and for other gatherings on campus. Radio programmes on campus FM stations can step up their campaign against indecent dressing. There could also be peer-counseling sessions to train students to counsel their colleagues to dress in order to be admired by all.
3. Lecturers can caution students during their tutorial meetings to help them understand the consequences of improper and indecent dressings.
4. It seems that most female students do not know what to wear at any specific time. Dresses meant for lectures are worn to church and vice versa. Some even walk in the streets with clothes meant for sporting activities and beach relaxation. They need education on the choice of outfits to wear at any particular time. This can be done during Hall week celebrations and Departmental week celebrations.
5. One cannot talk about campus fashion without mentioning the part Art Educators and Fashion can play in maintaining conducive learning environment. Art Educators and Fashion designers must educate learners on the importance of good grooming and decency in clothing or dressing. They could organise workshops and seminars on fashion so that students get to know their figure types, to enable them dress to enhance their assets and hide their flaws as well.
6. Other relevant institutions such as the Ministry for Women and Children's Affairs, National Council on Women and Development and various women's organisations need to add their voices to institute measures on campuses to discourage inappropriate and indecent dressing in order to instil the proper way of dressing in the students and more especially to curb the rate of rape and its associated evils including STDs, unwanted pregnancies and abortions.

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